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Aim of the Idea of Pure Experience: William James, Nishida Kitarō and Inoue Enryō

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During the Meiji period, when Japan came into full-fledged contact with the Western culture for the first time, the Japanese people were attracted to many things, from technology to legal institutions, economics, the arts, etc. Eventually, they were also deeply interested in the academic field of philosophy that lay in the background. When Japan embarked on its modernisation project, the field of philosophy was first taught by foreigners. However, figures gradually began seeking to engage in philosophy based on their own contemplations. Nishida Kitarō and Inoue Enryō were two major pioneers in this regard.

Today, I would like to investigate the theoretical structure of Nishida's idea of pure experience, which he develops in his *An Inquiry into the Good* and which served as the basis for his own inquiry. Although there is a tendency to consider his thought to be deeply related to religious ideas such as those found in Zen, I will logically elucidate the issues on which he worked and their contemporary nature.

The theory of pure experience was the first stance proposed by Nishida, who continued to develop his own theory over the course of his life and created many original concepts. Based on this idea of pure experience, Nishida wrote *An Inquiry into the Good*, which examines the true, the beautiful and the good. As is well known, the concept of pure experience was first proposed by William James, the contemporaneous American philosopher who tried to form an alternative thought to Europe's long philosophical tradition. However, while James continued to discuss this pioneering concept in several short articles, he passed away having never systematically put them together.

Today, James is often considered to be the pioneer of pragmatic philosophy and is of utmost importance. Surprisingly, not many philosophers focus on his idea of pure experience. In fact, it seems as if his contemporaries Nishida and Bergson were his only true readers. However, while both were inspired by James, they developed ideas that significantly differed from his original theories.

First, I would like to explain the concept of pure experience as presented by James, whose true value was only truly understood by great, original philosophers. James's thought has been described as 'radical empiricism' and as 'neutral monism'. Parting ways with the traditional British empiricism of Hume, Berkeley and the like, he tried to establish a philosophy thoroughly based on experience. In the process, while criticising British empiricism, he also moved in a direction markedly different from that of the German idealism dating back to Kant.

James's criticism of traditional empiricism was astute. According to him, the empiricism of Hume and others overemphasised the differences between the objects that we experience. This is because it attached importance to experiences that cannot be fit within the framework of resemblance. Therefore, traditional empiricism treated experiences as separate and disconnected from each other. On

the other hand, it connected experiences by applying existing criteria, such as association or cause and effect. In other words, it conceived of the experiencing mind itself only within pre-established forms.¹

Against this view, James advocated the position that the connections between experiences could themselves be known as individual, concrete experiences. Originally, when Experience A leads to Experience B, one has an experience of a connection or an experience of a failure of connection. This itself is an experience, and criteria such as them being associated as similar things do not exist beforehand. Each time one experience is linked to another, and a connection is experienced.

This idea led James to a drastically different way of thinking from the metaphysics that had existed up until his time. If one considers even the relation between one experience and another experience as an experience, then there is no need to establish the concept of a mind separate from the experience itself from the very beginning. Therefore, he considered the 'mind' as appearing in an ad hoc fashion as composed of experiences of connection and disconnection. Concretely speaking, when one senses that Experiences A and B are connected, it follows that Experience A is expected to lead to Experience B, and Experience B is the anticipated 'object' of the connection. Tracing the experience of connection, one retrospectively finds an anticipation of the connection in this experience. James states that this is the concrete form of the 'mind' in the experience of connection.

When one perceives a connection between two experiences, a past experience that connects to the present experience is discovered. This is the 'mind'. Furthermore, for the 'mind', the second experience ends up having existed as the 'object' of expectation. Each time another connection of experiences occurs, the 'mind' is retroactively recreated. This is nothing other than an experience. James's theory is called subject-object neutral monism because it adopts this position.

The traditional empiricism considered the contents of experiences to be

disjointed; The radical empiricism viewed the 'mind' itself concerning experience to be fragmented. The understanding that the 'mind' is retroactively discovered is surprising. Past experiences do not necessarily connect to immediately subsequent ones; they sometimes connect to ones that occur much later. Meanwhile, expectation is suspended in mid-air. James expressed the idea of a certain experience being useful for the expectation of a subsequent separate experience as *substitution*.²

From this position, James criticised the philosophy of German idealism as well. Reacting to the empiricism of Hume and others, who treated the contents of experiences as unconnected, Kant attached importance to the role of the 'mind' that integrates these experiences and developed a theory that attempted to precisely ascertain the limits of the abilities of this 'mind'. However, from James's perspective, continental philosophy from Neo-Kantianism onwards only considered the 'mind' as integrating the content of experiences and as what's produced by the 'subtraction' of the content. Therefore, it is both fixed and not concrete.³

In the field of philosophy, prior to the idea of pure experience, the position of thinking of the 'mind' in terms of plurality could not exist in principle. This became one of the major characteristics of James's theory. In general, a schema is adopted in which the content of multiple experiences is fit under one 'mind', whereas irretrievable multiplicity and difference (such as 'things themselves') remain outside. While basically having this schema in mind, Husserl, Heidegger and thinkers such as Derrida have continued to discuss the boundary between outside and inside (*autre* and *même*), the good and bad aspects of this distinction, etc.

James's theory contains a strong tendency to treat the subsequent experience in the transition from one experience to another as an 'expected "object"'. In fact,

pure experience comes before the division between subject and object, but it becomes posterior due to the experiences being connected. During such a time, what happens when multiple 'minds' are involved in the second experience that appears as an 'object'? This issue gradually occupied a considerable portion of James's interest. In his articles such as 'How Two Minds Can Know One Thing', he continued to persistently consider this issue.⁴ In direct opposition to the philosophical model in which 'mind' is singular and objects are multiple, he continued to think about the nature of a situation in which one object becomes the meeting point of multiple 'minds'.

To digress, the object-oriented philosophy that Graham Harman has been promoting in recent years while criticising philosophy up through post-structuralism is seeking to overcome philosophy from Kant onwards based on similar aims.⁵ Such individuals as Bruno Latour, who deeply influenced Harman,⁶ and Michel Serres, who is at the root of Latour and Harman's theories and whom I hold in high regard, consider medium-like 'objects' and their relation with multiple actors as the basis for their thoughts.⁷

While James's discourse was filled with many original ideas and was extremely foresighted, it faced some difficulties in articulating the functions of the 'mind' and the rich experience of the world of concrete 'objects'. This was because his theory primarily explained functions such as (1) a preceding experience connecting to a subsequent experience and (2) through this, expectation being fulfilled by subsequent experience.

If the working of the 'mind' involves only expectation and its fulfilment, our 'minds' have only the function of simply extending and recognising events that occurred in the past. Expectation being fulfilled is not simply experience continuing and becoming fixed; it must be the expansion of the possibility of the continuation of experience. Even if experience itself endures and changes, having

the possibility of past experience being recognised is the fulfilment of expectation in its true sense.

The experience of 'objects' as things that continue while changing becomes possible only when they are mediums that merge multiple expectations. For example, James states that an expectation about a certain pen comes into existence in a context formed by multiple experiences of a set of feelings (arisen interest, directed attention, used viewpoint, etc.) that were directed towards it in the past.⁸ The pen continues in the present and exists as a certainty, even if it is moved and used because it is an 'object' that is the juncture of multiple small expectations. Because a situation exists in which expectations from certain experiences are not met and expectations from other experiences are added, the pen that is subsequently experienced as an object becomes something that continues to exist while changing.

Here, the aforementioned one-many relation that holds 'objects' to be media clearly appears. Introducing this one-many relation, James's neutral monism could handle living experience while treating subsequent experience as something that continues to exist while changing.

Although James's discussion of pure experience created a non-discrimination between 'mind' and 'object' and focused on the one-many relation, it was completely conducted in the directions of past to present, multiple to singular, and mind to object in its final stage. James probably held the conception that subsequent experience, which continues while changing, brings together the mind's various expectations as objects, thereby generalising and increasingly expanding these expectations. If this was not the case, his theory of pure experience would presumably have proposed that holding an experience in the mind ceases when its usefulness is used up.

The subsequent pure experience itself would then tend to be something that

comes after this ceasing.

Furthermore, conversely, if one emphasises to the maximum extent possible being 'a certainty even if moved and used' as a way to understand subsequent experience, the 'object' can no longer be a pen that was simply picked up on a whim. For the 'mind', it is necessary that the object be a companion that is faithfully and continually waiting in the future, as well as an object that gradually extends the usefulness of its expectation. This ideal is something like a universal tool.

However, if subsequent experience is like this, the one-directional process of working from the 'mind' to the 'object' becomes too strong, and in the end we are returned to a subject-object dualism.

2

Nishida Kitarō, an enthusiastic reader of the illness-prone James, hoped while worrying from across the ocean that James would complete his metaphysics. We know that through his friend Suzuki Daisetsu, Nishida, though he was still an unknown, tried to engage in correspondence with James. It appears that while adoring this contemporary of his, Nishida also felt somewhat dissatisfied theoretically with his thought.

In a short lecture at the time, Nishida stated the following:

[James] states that the relation that integrates various experiences is also a type of experience. While I find it very interesting that based on this he tries to explain by empiricism areas in which rationalists emphasise unity, it appears unclear how these are related to or connected to each other.⁹

Nishida further stated, 'I think that pure experience is not passive as was held by

any empiricist; rather, the state of mental activity—in other words, will—is the most direct state of our experience.’¹⁰ It was Nishida’s understanding that this direct experience, which develops and differentiates the self, is a pure experience. Just from reading through this statement once, you probably cannot judge what portion of James’s theory, pure experience, inspired Nishida, then, what sort of change in perspective he was attempting to bring into it.

First, let us consider the nature of this change in perspective. To do so, we may find useful his predecessor Inoue Enryō’s *An Evening Conversation about Philosophy* or *Tetsugaku ichi yūwa*, which is said to have prompted Nishida to engage in philosophy. The worldview of this work, which takes the form of a dialogue, is strongly informed by the Buddhist philosophical tradition, partially because Enryō was born into a True Pure Land sect temple. However, Enryō was a privileged person of his time who had received a modern education and who tried to rely on philosophy to consider issues that Japanese people had previously considered through Buddhism and other traditions. In this book, Enryō states that genuine philosophy involves ‘investigating the principles of truth and the basis of academic fields’, as well as interpreting ‘the origin of matter and mind, the nature of the relationship between matter and mind, and other issues’. Enryō’s assertion that philosophy investigates the relation between matter and mind—in other words, subject and object—and their origin, as well as establishing the principles of truth and the foundation for other academic fields of study, anticipated the basic stance of Nishida, who would eventually be charmed by the radical empiricism of James.¹¹

In *An Evening Conversation about Philosophy*, two philosophers engage in dialogue: Enzan, a follower of materialism and a pluralist, and Ryōsui, a supporter of idealism and a monist. The two try to explain the structure of the world based on the principles of matter (in other words, ‘objects’) and ‘mind’. They repeatedly

refute each other, and both become silent in the end.

Here, along with the topic of subject and object, the issue of the one and the many has already appeared. Enryō appears as the teacher of these two philosophers to mediate the debate, asserting that both are biased: the monist Ryōsui looks only at non-discrimination (*musyabetu* 無差別 non-differentiation) and does not know discrimination, whereas the pluralist Enzan sees only discrimination and does not know non-discrimination. Enryō states that discrimination (the many) and non-discrimination (the one) are one, and that no matter which one of these a theory starts from, it will lead to the other. Furthermore, he indicates that they are like two sides of the same coin: if one appears on the front, the other will appear on the back:

On the one side this entity includes discrimination, while on the other side it has non-discrimination. It revolves with its own potency showing sometimes its side of discrimination and at other times its side of non-discrimination. No one knows when this changing began or when it will end. (1: 45)

In this manner, Enryō discusses looking at the relation between matter and mind without being partial to either side—in other words, moving between perspectives.

Let's now return to my earlier question: what type of change in perspective did Nishida bring to James's theory of pure experience? It is not difficult to imagine that if Nishida had found any point that James had not completely thought through, it was that his theory of pure experience ended up as a discussion that moved from past to present and from 'mind' to 'object'. Did not Nishida and Enryō share the idea that a complete consideration must in the end consider and articulate things from the opposite side as well, as if drawing a circle?

In this manner, Nishida would devise a plan to differentiate and develop the idea

of pure experience not only as an early-experience-to-later-experience vector but also going backwards from a present single experience to multiple past experiences, as well as elucidating the way in which these multiple experiences connect. As he continued his reflections, this idea presented him with many unexpected discoveries, and he developed it in *An Inquiry into the Good*.

3

In the aforementioned lecture, Nishida presents the somewhat peculiar criticism of James's theory that in it various experiences are unified from 'outside' like a 'hinge'. He probably meant that James had a very strong tendency to treat subsequent experience as an 'object' anticipated by previous multiple experiences. In contrast, Nishida, trying to view the situation from the opposite perspective, viewed it as something that brought together multiple past expectations, based on an angle which is inherent in the present side. In subsequent experience, these past multiple expectations are given a new meaning or context in the form of 'present consciousness'; that is, they are unified.

When it is seen that even immediate pure experience is something that was composed of past experiences and that can be subsequently divided into single elements, you may call it involved. However, no matter how involved pure experience is, in its own instant it is always a pure single fact. Even if it is a reproduction of past consciousness, when this consciousness is unified within present consciousness—thereby becoming a single element and acquiring a new meaning—it can already no longer be considered to be the same as past consciousness. Similarly, when one analyses one's present consciousness, that which is analysed is no longer the same as this present consciousness.¹²

Nishida emphasises here that 'present consciousness' is completely a 'pure single fact', and it is experienced as having come together as one. However, he also says that it can be divided into multiple past experiences.

According to James, as past multiple expectations become smoothly connected with subsequent experience while being linked to one another, these expectations end up being realised. Nishida understands this by starting from subsequent experience, which comes into existence out of multiple past experiences and realises the self while giving these experiences a new meaning and context. While in pure experience, subject and object are of course not divided, Nishida actually treats present pure experience (subsequent pure experience) as subject-like. He considers this as the 'mind', a subject that functions actively and 'continues to exist while changing'. He also asserts that the 'mind' branches out and is connected to various past experiences.

While Nishida says 'present consciousness', by 'present' he does not mean a single instant. Rather, this present involves some continuity. Subsequent experience continues to exist while including change to some extent; the 'present' includes this continuity.

The scope of pure experience naturally matches the scope of attention. However, I do not think that this scope necessarily is limited to one bit of attention. Without adding even a little thought, we can shift our attention to a state in which subject and object are not divided. For example, when one is trying one's hardest to climb up a steep cliff or when a musician plays a mastered tune he has mastered, there can definitely be said to be successive perception. ... In these mental phenomena, perception maintains its connection to strict unity, and even if consciousness goes from one thing to something else, attention is constantly directed to things. The previous

function naturally brings about the latter, and in between there is not even a little break in which thought could enter. When compared to momentary perception, regardless of the change in attention and the duration of time, in this complete connection, this point of union between subject and object, there is not even little discrimination.¹³

In these examples, subsequent experience takes the form of a continually existing 'object': a steep cliff, a musical instrument being played, etc. A subject acts on these things in various ways, and these multiple workings of the subject connect to each other while having a continuing 'object' as their medium, with the result that one after another these actions are given a new meaning. Around this type of 'object', Nishida sees a certain 'present' that is continuous yet changes. The expression 'even if consciousness goes from one thing to something else, attention is constantly directed to things' marvellously depicts the referent or medium-like role played by this 'object'. Nishida does not try to articulate this 'object' as James does. He also states that the scope of pure experience is within the 'scope of attention' as well as 'mental phenomena'. However, what is placed within this 'scope' is exactly such a continuous 'object'.

Incidentally, when one goes back and divides subsequent pure experience into multiple past pure experiences, how are they linked together? Each past experience is a pure experience, so naturally they have continuity to some extent in the same way as subsequent pure experience. Each has multiple concrete natures, and each one has come into existence through the coming together of experiences from the still more distant past. Although some past experiences connect to subsequent experiences, there are also ones that do not connect to anything. Or even if they did, all their natures would not connect with later experiences; only some parts of them would connect. In other words, past experiences connect to subsequent

experience in a way that reduces their concreteness. Therefore, from the perspective of subsequent experience, the past experiences to which it connects are more abstract, and they appear as more general experiences.

Furthermore, subsequent pure experience comes into existence by making these multiple past general experiences come together. This retroactively divides it into a relation with many general past experiences. Nishida states that 'judgement' arises based on this dividing. Retroactively, multiple 'judgements' appear when subsequent pure experience comes into existence. However, compared to pure experience itself, they are only 'general' things.

Here, Nishida's marvellous originality can be observed in several ways. He attempts to explain the definition of 'generality' completely in terms of experience, and he also thinks that all experiences can become general within their relations with other experiences. He further considers the linkage from concrete experience to that which is more general, stating that multiple general things simultaneously diverge from a certain concrete thing. Nishida continued to develop this theory throughout his life, and he showed deep sympathy for Leibniz's Monadology in his later years. The development of this sympathy already appears in these early understandings.

4

Nishida believed that past experiences that have appeared as more general things by connecting to a certain concrete experience are newly merged with another new concrete experience after having been linked with other general past experiences. The concepts of 'will' and 'association' are useful for investigating this idea of his. While James saw expectation as retroactively being discovered from subsequent experience, in *An Inquiry into the Good*, 'will' is considered from the state in which it is located on the way to reaching its aim.

Therein, Nishida understands 'will' to be the functioning that picks up 'present consciousness' and realises itself. He states, 'Willing something is in other words directing one's attention to it.' Furthermore, 'In order for us to will movement, it is adequate to bring to mind memory of the past. In other words, it is fine just to direct attention towards this; movement naturally accompanies it.'¹⁴

While a certain will in this way realises and manifests itself as the 'centre of consciousness', various connections exist between experiences that do not converge in a specific direction. This non-directional network is the periphery of the 'centre of consciousness'. Nishida thought that this interchangeable positional relation between centre and periphery separates will from mere consciousness.

For example, here there is a pen. The moment that one looks at it, the pen is just a single reality; there is no intellection or thought. Various associations occur regarding it, and the centre of consciousness shifts and previous consciousness is considered to be an object. When this happens, previous consciousness becomes simply a knowledge-like thing. On the other hand, the association arises that this pen is something with which one writes. When this association accompanies this pen as the fringe of previous consciousness, it is knowledge; when this associational consciousness itself inclines towards independence—in other words, when the centre of consciousness tries to shift to this pen—it becomes a state of desire. When this associational consciousness finally becomes an independent reality, it is will, and one truly knows this pen.¹⁵

The sphere of 'association' that is merely knowledge is the sphere of general things when seen from concrete experience. However, by becoming generalised, in concert with other 'various associations', it can through a certain will manifest itself

as another ‘centre of consciousness’. Nishida showed that the centre–periphery positional relation is above all interchangeable, and he also succeeded in concretely and immanently articulating subsequent pure experience—which James was able to articulate only as something somewhat external—by clarifying the role of past experience.

Here, the perspective that subsequent pure experience manifests itself in diverse and numerous ways is important, as well as the idea that general concepts mediate these manifestations. This conception is actually closer to Peirce’s idea of abduction rather than to James. In abduction, from a certain concrete object (secondness) a more general idea (firstness) is extracted and is applied to another concrete interpretant (thirdness). While this is a theoretical formulation of everyday reasoning, in Nishida’s case, even this firstness is experience, and all experiences can become firstness. In this sense, the general things that arise from Nishida’s discussion are both experiential and general. In contemporary terms, they are qualia.

In Nishida’s theory of pure experience, there is no hierarchy in which general things ‘extend’ themselves. The one–many relation that serves here as a premise opens endlessly into diversity because each of the ‘many’ is also a new ‘one’. Furthermore, any of the many past experiences can be placed in the location of ‘one’ as a pure experience. Here, we very clearly find a network–like structure. Furthermore, subsequent experience is not just expected based on past experience, but it is located within this network and understood in terms of its involvement with many other pure experiences. A musician performing on the instrument that he or she has mastered is an example.

To call a particular experience general does not mean that it is simply maintained and recognised, but rather that various changes appear in subsequent experience by being in concert with other general things. While precisely tuning various

instruments generalises each of the sounds that come from these instruments, the orchestra that plays a collection of instruments can produce infinitely complex and diverse music in the end.

Thus, Nishida often compared pure experience to the self-expression of an artist.¹⁶ For Nishida, ‘usefulness’ for the act of expression, which takes a diversity of forms, is the very thing that constitutes the ‘generality’ of pure experience. This diversity literally transforms the ‘self’. That which makes known oneself by the act of expression is also this world itself. Pure experience is the self-expression of the world. The basic form of what Nishida would, in various ways, continue to research and express through his later years already appears fully in this theory of pure experience. The theory of pure experience, which began to evolve under James, was developed by Nishida, and consequently various ideas proposed by him flourished.

- 1 William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912). Dover Publications, 2003. pp. 42–43.
- 2 *Ibid.* pp. 62–63.
- 3 *Ibid.* pp. 9–10.
- 4 *Ibid.* p. 80.
- 5 Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks : Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, re.press, 2009.
- 6 Bruno Latour, *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes - essai d’anthropologie symétrique*, La Découverte, Paris, 1991.
- 7 Michel Serres, *Le parasite*, Grasset, Paris, 1980.
- 8 *Ibid.* p.130.
- 9 Nishida Kitarō, *Nishida Kitarō Zensyū* (Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō) XIII, iwanamisyoten, 1952, p. 97
- 10 Nishida Kitarō, *Nishida Kitarō Zensyū XIII*, iwanamisyoten, 1952, pp. 97–98
- 11 Inoue Enryō, *Inoue Enryō Sensyū I*, 1987, p. 34
- 12 Nishida Kitarō, *Nishida Kitarō Zensyū I*, iwanamisyoten, 1947, p. 11
- 13 Nishida Kitarō, *Nishida Kitarō Zensyū I*, iwanamisyoten, 1947, pp. 11–12

- 14 Nishida Kitarō, *Nishida Kitarō Zensyū I*, iwanamisyoten, 1947, p. 29
- 15 Nishida Kitarō, *Nishida Kitarō Zensyū I*, iwanamisyoten, 1947, p. 38
- 16 Nishida Kitarō, *Nishida Kitarō Zensyū I*, iwanamisyoten, 1947, p. 43